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ABSTRACT

The op-ed page in the newspaper can be a good place to discuss opinions and ideas that the public needs to know, but which have been ignored by the media. For example, in 1983 a speech on educational research by William Spady of the United States Office of Education was given coverage by the news media. The news media described the speech and offered opinions on it, yet presented no comments from educators who could apply their expertise to the problems of public schools. Op-ed pieces can provide an arena for important ideas that get little play in the press. These pieces elicit more feedback and provide it sooner than academic articles published for small, but more sophisticated, audiences, and, the opinion pieces have a better chance of influencing public policy. (Ten guidelines on how to write columns for the op-ed page are included.) (MS)

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HOW TO DISCUSS EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ON THE OPINION PAGE OF A NEWSPAPER

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When I was growing up in a small South Dakota town in the 1940's, a man named Whitey was my father's favorite drinking buddy. Whitey was also the local radio station's newsreader. He took his extracurricular activities as seriously as his news reading; he read the news at 6 and, by 10, he'd have trouble reading the label on a beer bottle. From my many associations with Whitey, I acquired a distinct distrust of the representatives of the electronic media, and began to read the newspaper at the age of eight out of a sense of desperation.

Although I was an avid reader of newspapers from an early age, and since I possessed no particular talent for writing, it did not occur to me to write anything for newspapers until one afternoon in 1983 when I found myself confronted with a dilemma of sorts. I had attended an academic conference on educational research, and the newspapers were full of discussion about "A Nation at Risk," the presidential commission's perception of the demise of the American high school. Returning from the meeting in Montreal, I had two stops prior to reaching my destination. So I faced two choices: I could have six drinks on the three flights or I could begin writing down my reaction to a speech on educational research that I'd heard that morning.

In the speech, William Spady of the U.S. Office of Education described how the superintendent of schools at Red Bank, New Jersey, influenced her teachers to restructure their schools. Spady's remarks were dramatic and powerful, but he had one problem. His ideas were encrusted in a thick, gooey brand of educational jargon.

Sitting in the Montreal airport waiting for customs agents to complete their work, it occurred to me that Spady's ideas were important and that they should reach a broader audience. But, like much that's written in educational research, his analysis was dense--to say the least.

Timely and deserving as Spady's ideas were, it seemed to me that they had little chance of reaching a larger audience, even though the mass media were saturated with discussions of education. Concepts such as "performance objectives" and "tight and loose coupling" peppered Spady's speech and seemed likely to separate his ideas from a general audience.

Meanwhile, newspaper accounts about "The Nation at Risk" reflected the National Commission on Excellence in Education's bleak view of our educational system. The news media described the report, talked about how bad the schools are, and offered opinions about why schools are so bad.

What was lacking, of course, were comments from educators who could apply their expertise to the problems of public schools. I had just heard a terrific speech on how one school had solved many of its problems. The research that Spady presented was good, extensive and unknown by the general public. He discussed teacher effectiveness--the subject of a body of research that the media had virtually ignored.

The op-ed page seemed a good place to discuss these ideas. The op-ed page was relatively new to the American newspaper. Joseph C. Goulden in "Fit to Print" claims the concept originated in 1962 when John Oakes, editorial page editor of the New York Times, approached his publisher to discuss a problem he faced. Oakes had no place to publish pieces submitted by someone from outside the editorial staff longer than a letter to the editor, but shorter than a magazine piece. He didn't have room for this kind of article because each day his editorial page featured about five editorials, letters to the editor, and the regular Times columnists.

What Oakes wanted, Goulden claims, was a section for opinion pieces written by persons outside the Times staff who were not necessarily tied to a specific editorial or current news story. When Orvil Dryfoos, the Times publisher, accepted Oakes proposal, the entire page opposite the editorial page became a forum for outsiders' differing views, and the op-ed page was born. Since 1962, the concept has been used by most major American newspapers. Some newspapers pay for these columns; others don't.

Since the op-ed page seemed like an appropriate place to present my views, I took a shot at it. I wrote a column which was published in the Minneapolis Star and Tribune. The piece began recounting something opinion page readers may have already known: "The recent report of the National Commission of Excellence in Education, 'A Nation at Risk,' paints a pessimistic portrait of American schools." The second sentence then moved into the subject I wanted to address: "Among the several areas of weakness documented by the report are the

quality and effectivess of the teachers."

Within the same paragraph, I moved to the idea that research can help solve educational problems: "Despite the report's pessimistic tone, a growing body of research could provide a blueprint for the improvement of our schools."

In one paragraph, then, my article went from the general statement about the report's tone to the specific aspect of the subject I wanted to discuss. The second paragraph read:

"The research shows that during the past few years some of the mystery of teaching has been unveiled. At its core, the research shows that student achievement results from the efforts of teachers, that it is possible to distinguish good teachers from less effective teachers and, not surprisingly, that many of the cherished beliefs about teaching are not supported by the evidence."

By the third paragraph, I got to Spady's speech: "Several researchers have attempted to determine why some schools--mainly urban schools with a high proportion of poor and minority pupils--outperform others in teaching basic skills as measured by standardized tests. William Spady of the National Center for the Improvement of Learning claims that when these researchers found that some schools had dramatically outperformed others, they began to pinpoint the instructional climate, curriculum, and expectations that make them different.'"

Referring to Spady's paper, I reviewed his example of a study of 11 secondary schools in London which found significant ways in which effective schools differed from ineffective ones. "Teachers in effective schools expect more from their students and they spend more time on the subject matter. Teachers in effective schools are more likely to agree about responses to student discipline problems, and although all teachers criticized their schools, the teachers in effective schools are more likely to provide constructive criticism and some praise."

I learned much from writing that first op-ed piece, and the experience taught me that the opinion page is the best way to get your message to a broad audience. Certainly, I've received more feedback from colleagues, especially those in other disciplines, about articles in newspapers than from articles I've written for academic publications.

Without getting too much into mechanics, there were three other things I did with that 1983 article that I applied to my subsequent opinion writing. First, the writing must be direct and to the point, as in this paragraph:

"Much of the current research suggests that the teacher is the most powerful force affecting classroom achievement. It shows that certain kinds of classroom behaviors lead to effective learning."

Second, I challenged contemporary conventional wisdom a bit: "At odds with conventional wisdom, effective teachers seem of offer

less student choice, use fewer small groups and ask more lower-level questions than less effective teachers."

Third, I provided a conclusion that tied the main points to the issues under public discussion. "A renewed local commitment to the quality of American education coupled with careful attention to the research described above will perhaps provide a starting point to improve the state of education so pessimistically described in 'A Nation at Risk.'"

But there was also another important factor: There was something counterintuitive--at least to the media's prevailing conventional wisdom--about the research. Most Americans seemed to believe that their schools were bad, almost beyond hope. But a body of research about teacher effectiveness contained information necessary to improve deplorable conditions rather dramatically. The article didn't stop at Spady's ideas, but included some political analysis and my own views.

Based on this and subsequent opinion pieces, I've put together ten guidelines for writing columns for the op-ed page:

1. When you write an article for an opinion page, you're reaching for two audiences. The first, of course, is the person who decides whether to buy your column. Journalism jargon labels this person the gatekeeper, and he or she controls your access to the readers, your ultimate audience.

2. You face tough competition from dozens of syndicated services whose material lands on that editor's desk every day. In most cases, the newspaper has already paid for those columns and they are preset, available on a computer-to- computer message that requires little effort before publication. Your column, on the other hand, will require editing, rewriting, and typing into the computer. To be considered, you'll want to make your article as convenient as possible to the editor.

3. So you should be familiar with the opinion page. Study the page to figure out what topics and viewpoints seem to appeal to the page editor. But don't assume the paper will only buy columns on the tried and true topics. One editor who buys columns said he's most impressed by columns on topics that everyone else has overlooked. That perspective should give us educators much room in which to maneuver.

4. Read the news pages as well as the editorial page. I missed a golden opportunity last winter as I traveled through Denver. That day the Denver Post featured three articles on a plan to require statewide testing for all public school students. At the time I passing through Denver, the Colorado legislature was debating the issue on which I had just published an article in a Minnesota newspaper. Some of my ideas could have been tailored easily to fit the Colorado situation.

5. Consider your own qualifications. What I had to offer the statewide teaching debates, for example, was knowledge about testing from my own research and experience as a high school and college teacher. Tie your qualifications to the specific issue by writing a

"tag line," a brief, one sentence description of yourself that the newspaper could run at the end of your column. This tag line should convince your two audiences --the gatekeeper and readers -- of your qualifications to comment on this issue. (If you have experience with writer's block, try writing the tag line first to remind yourself about what you have to offer on the subject.)

6. Choose a theme and focus on it. Walter Lippman, who wrote 1,200 editorials in five years during the the 1920s', said the writer of editorials must choose one central idea, present the idea, provide evidence, sum up the argument and get out. If you try to cover your entire agenda, you risk making leaps in logic, confusing your readers and diluting your message.

7. Avoid jargon. Not only will jargon lose your gatekeeper in the first sentence, you'll give the impression that you're an elitist. If your purpose in writing the column is to win people over to your way of thinking, then you have to write in language people can understand. Many science magazines and newspapers have proven that the most complex ideas can be written in language that most people can understand. Always have your spouse , neighbor or some other disinterested person read your column before you submit it.

8. Craft your lead. News reporters spend most of their time writing leads. Once the lead is written, the facts of a news story fall into place. News is written in what the textbooks call the "inverted pyramid" with the most important information first. An opinion column need not follow this format, but its opening line, coming as it does

in a newspaper, must make some compromises with the newspaper format. Your opening line must grab the attention of your two audiences. Wading through a pile of press releases and syndicated columns, your gatekeeper will not read beyond your first sentence if it's dull.

9. Use your lead as a way to organize ideas and release writer's block. After you've made a list --not necessarily an outline-- of ideas you want to cover, write an opening that will grab attention. Put aside your notes and play with opening sentences no longer than three typewritten lines. Some reporters write pages of nothing but leads before they hit on the formula that fits a particular news story. Your lead should tell your editors why they should buy the column and your readers why they should take time to read it.

10. Consider why you're writing this opinion piece. Go for leads that tell why this subject is important and why your ideas deserve further consideration. In this fact-filled era, many readers are eager for interpretation and opinion. Don't beat around the bush, people will respect you for taking a stand.

After the piece on teacher effectiveness was published, I submitted several others. The second was written after I attended a conference which concluded that little is known about college teaching. Of course, I disagreed and used educational research to buttress my argument.

In one op-ed piece, I challenged the idea that school effectivenesss can be measured by how students score on standardized

tests. This article, mentioned earlier as a possible source for a submission to the Denver Post, was published in response to an endorsement in the St Paul Pioneer Press-Dispatch of widespread testing to improve Minnesota Schools. The primary source for the op-ed piece on testing was a discussion of test bias by test expert Norman Frederickson in a leading psychological journal. A good tactic is to select one discussion of educational research as the glue that binds the op-ed piece together. National columnist William Raspberry uses this method frequently.

Writing op- ed pieces is fun. It's a kick to see your name and opinion in a place where people will actually read your work. Opinion articles elicit more feedback and provide it sooner than academic articles published for smaller, but more sophisticated, audiences. And the opinion pieces have a better chance of influencing public policy. Opinion columns help me sharpen my own thinking about a subject. To say it simply enough for a newspaper, you need a good grasp of the subject. A final bonus, for me anyway, is that the opinion piece tells my neighbors what I do for a living. The best reaction I've gotten came from a neighbor: "I thought you stayed home a lot because you were lazy. I guess you write articles like the one in the morning paper, huh ?"